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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**Opium, Insurgency, and U.S. Counterdrug Strategy in Afghanistan:
A Case for Change**

by

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Major, U.S. Marine Corps

**A paper submitted to the Provost, Naval War College, for consideration in the Prize
Essay Competition in the Naval War College Foundation Award category.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

Signature: _____

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Abstract

America has been at war for eight long years in Afghanistan with no prospect of a quick or decisive victory in sight. Among the many challenges threatening Afghanistan's security and stability, insurgency and illicit drugs have coalesced into a virulent threat to the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives. Long tolerated as a separate and minor problem from the insurgency, opium has grown like a cancerous tumor simultaneously feeding the insurgency while starving legitimate economic growth, weakening the Afghan government, and threatening U.S. national security interests and the long-term viability of a stable, democratic Afghanistan.

The failure to discern this symbiotic relationship between the insurgency and the opium trade has proved a major shortcoming of U.S. counterdrug strategy leading to mistakes in its design and operational implementation that persist today. In order to prevail against opium, the U.S. must first, correctly understand the history, background and interactions of the opium-insurgency nexus, second, fix the flaws in its counterdrug approach by eliminating eradication and strengthening alternative development and interdiction, and third, augment Afghan counterdrug forces with U.S. military forces until they are capable of operating independently. This research paper presents the historical, structural, economic, and security causes underlying opium's resilience. It outlines the opium economy's functions, and highlights the nature and effects of the opium-insurgency nexus on U.S. and Afghan efforts to establish functioning state institutions and expand government control. And finally, the paper analyzes U.S. counterdrug efforts and proposes changes in focus and resource allocation.

INTRODUCTION

If Afghanistan becomes ...a narco mafia state, we will have lost the war on terrorism there. Even if we capture Osama bin Laden and his henchmen...we will still have failed in our mission. So long as Afghanistan's narco warlords are allowed to grow, process, and traffic heroin and opium millions upon millions of dollars will end up flowing into terrorist hands. We may have ended Afghanistan as a training ground for al-Qaeda and other global terrorist groups, but until we go after the drug labs, the open air drug markets, the traffickers themselves terrorism will still be nurtured.

—U.S. Representative Henry Hyde, 2004

America has been at war for eight long years in Afghanistan with no prospect of a quick or decisive victory in sight. Among the many challenges threatening Afghanistan's security and stability, insurgency and illicit drugs have coalesced into a virulent threat to the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives. Long tolerated as a separate and minor problem from the insurgency, opium has grown like a cancerous tumor simultaneously feeding the insurgency while starving legitimate economic growth, weakening the Afghan government, and threatening U.S. national security interests and the long-term viability of a stable and democratic Afghanistan.

The failure to discern this symbiotic relationship between the insurgency and the opium trade has proved a major shortcoming of U.S. counterdrug strategy leading to mistakes in its design and operational implementation that persist today. As the above epigraph points out, if we lose the war against opium we will lose the war against the extremists. In order to prevail against opium the U.S. must first, correctly understand the history, background and interactions of the opium-insurgency nexus, second, fix the flaws in its counterdrug approach by eliminating eradication and strengthening alternative development and interdiction, and third, augment Afghan counterdrug forces with U.S. military forces until they are capable of operating independently. This research paper

presents the historical, structural, economic, and security causes underlying opium's resilience. It outlines the opium economy's functions, and highlights the nature and effects of the opium-insurgency nexus on U.S. and Afghan efforts to establish functioning state institutions and expand government control. And finally, the paper analyzes U.S. counterdrug efforts and proposes changes in focus and resource allocation.

BACKGROUND—OPIUM'S ROOTS

Poverty is frequently cited as the primary driver of opium cultivation;¹ however, it is the dynamic interaction of historical, structural, economic, and security influences that have collectively promoted its growth.

Historical: Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is anything but new, preceding today's insurgency by centuries.² However, Afghanistan's recent history of back-to-back conflicts beginning with the Soviet's invasion, followed immediately by civil war, and ending with the Taliban's oppressive rule in³ gave opium a powerful boost by wrecking most of the country's physical infrastructure giving it room to strengthen its roots. These enduring infrastructural deficiencies have retarded the return of resource-intensive, licit agriculture and other economic activities even today.

As Afghanistan grew increasingly insecure and devoid of legitimate economic sources of support, opium became progressively important to the various belligerents in these wars as a means of arming, equipping, and recruiting their forces. This growing dependence on drug-derived revenues only further encouraged the expansion of opium. For example,

1 Note: During a particular field survey cited 92% of poppy-growing farmers gave poverty as the main reason for cultivation. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, Executive Summary, United Nations, August 2008,

www.unodc.org/documents/publications/afghanistan_opium_survey_2008.pdf (accessed 13 March 2009), 17.

2 Matthew Lacouture, *Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan: Counternarcotics and Counterinsurgency*, <http://www.jar-gwu.org/node/39>, (accessed 3 March 2009).

3 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan: When Counternarcotics Undermines Counterterrorism," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2005) <http://www.proquest.com/>, (accessed 17 March 2009), 56.

during the war against the Soviet invaders the mujahedeen used opium, in addition to U.S. financial support, to buy weapons and needed supplies.⁴ U.S. policy makers, for their part, overlooked opium's role as a political sine qua non in the pursuit of the larger objective of defeating their Cold War foe.⁵ U.S. and international aid quickly dried up following the Soviet's defeat, though, and opium became an ever more important source of funds to the loosely allied mujahedeen groups who began to fight each other for dominance in the ensuing civil war.⁶ Later, opium received an added boost under the Taliban who, in spite of their strict interpretation of *sharia* law, institutionalized poppy cultivation by levying a religious 'tax' or *ushr* on it along with other agricultural products.⁷

Structural: As touched on above, the destruction of Afghanistan's physical infrastructure has produced far reaching effects that have enlarged opium's hold. Without road networks, storage facilities, electrical grids, reliable transportation systems, and access to regional and international markets⁸ legal crops are not profitable, and the absence of these modern structural requirements have forced many impoverished Afghan farmers to grow opium out of necessity. The opium poppy, on the other hand, is ideally suited to the austere, insecurity of rural farm life in Afghanistan. The plant itself is drought resistant; its resin stores for years without spoilage, and is without peer in earning potential.⁹ In 2008, for

4 James D. Medler, "Afghan Heroin: Terrain, Tradition and Turmoil," *Orbis* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 276.

5 Ibid., 276.

6 William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge," *The World Bank*, Policy Research Working Paper, March 2008

http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2008/03/04/000158349_20080304082230/Rendered/PDFwps4545.pdf (accessed 14 April 2009), 3.

7 Ibid., 3.

⁸ Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication*, (New York, NY: Center on International Cooperation, 2008), 35.

<http://www.cic.nyu.edu/afghanistan/docs/counternarcoticsfinal.pdf> (accessed 25 February 2009).

⁹ Alyssa Greenspan, "Are We Fighting The Right War?" *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Summer 2008, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>, (accessed 23 February 2009), 2.

example, wheat sold for \$1625 a hectare piling in comparison to poppy at \$4,662 a hectare.¹⁰ Hence, at the most elemental level, the decision to grow poppy for most farmers is a purely economic one, which these structural deficiencies serve to reinforce. There are, however, additional economic influences that limit farmers' options and increase the poppy's appeal.

Economic: Many Afghan farmers cannot survive the winter, lease land, or buy the supplies needed to plant and harvest the next season's crop without resorting to the informal credit system known as *salaam*. *Salaam* is the Afghan equivalent of a mafia loan—the terms overwhelmingly favor the lender while shifting all the risk to the borrower. Under *salaam*, creditors (often better-off land owners who lease tracts of land to tenant farmers) advance cash loans equal to half of next year's opium crop in return for promises to grow an agreed upon quantity.¹¹ Interest rates can be as high as “250 percent per annum.”¹² Moreover, the farmer remains liable for the contracted amount even if the crop should fail, whether from natural causes, or at the hands of government eradication forces.¹³ The effects of these predatory lending practices, when compounded by drought and crop eradication, collectively deepen a farmer's indebtedness leaving him susceptible to coercive inducements to continue growing poppy.¹⁴ Given the lack of financing alternatives and persistent insecurity, poppy often proves to be not only the most economically profitable, but also the most economically secure crop choice for farmers in spite of the law enforcement risks associated with it.

10 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, Executive Summary, United Nations, August 2008, www.unodc.org/documents/publications/afghanistan_opium_survey_2008.pdf (accessed 13 March 2009), 1.

11 Jan Koehler and Christoph Zuercher, “Statebuilding, Conflict and Narcotics in Afghanistan: The View from Below,” *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (March 2007): 62-47, <http://www.ebsco.com/> (accessed 25 February 2009), 64.

12 Ibid., 65

13 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 28. <http://www.cic.nyu.edu/afghanistan/docs/counternarcoticsfinal.pdf> (accessed 25 February 2009).

14 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), 10. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32686.pdf> (accessed 11 April 2009).

Security: Opium follows insecurity, not the other way around, and often concentrates in the areas of greatest instability where government influence is feeble and the risk-costs associated with production are lower. Afghanistan's growing lawlessness and instability over the last 30 plus years has provided a perfect transplant host for the international opium trade that was being dismantled in other regions of the world. This shift phenomenon has been likened to a balloon that "when one part is...squeezed, its contents are displaced to another."¹⁵ Examples of this include the counterdrug successes of Pakistan and India where reductions in illegal opium production, or conversion to licit pharmaceutical enterprises, helped displace the bulk of the world's opium cultivation and processing to Afghanistan.¹⁶ This migration started in 1972 following Turkey's opium ban resulting in a threefold increase in opium produced in Afghanistan from 100 to 300 tons a year between 1979 and 1982.¹⁷ This trend has continued over time as other opium hot-spots, such as Southeast Asia's infamous "Golden Triangle"¹⁸ have declined while world-wide demand remained stable. Afghanistan is now the world's largest opium exporter supplying 93 percent of global demand¹⁹ by producing 7,700 tons with an estimated market value of \$732 million in 2008.²⁰

THE OPIUM ECONOMY

The opium industry dwarfs all other economic activities in Afghanistan—accounting for over half of 2008's GDP alone.²¹ While its influence impacts all segments of society, those directly profiting from the drug trade fall into one of four categories—farmers, refiners,

15 Coletta A. Youngers and Eileen Rosen, ed., "Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy" (Executive Summary, Washington Office on Latin America, November 2004), http://www.wola.org/media/ddhr_exec_sum_brief.pdf (accessed 30 March 2009), 4.

¹⁶ Matthew Lacouture, *Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan: Counternarcotics and Counterinsurgency*, 2.

¹⁷ James D. Medler, "Afghan Heroin: Terrain, Tradition and Turmoil," 276.

¹⁸ Matthew Lacouture, *Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan: Counternarcotics and Counterinsurgency*, 2.

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, 1.

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹ Ibid., 1.

traffickers, and facilitators—who collectively make up what has been termed the “opium economy.”²² A brief synopsis of each group and their respective role in the opium trade is necessary to accurately assess current U.S. strategy and where it needs to be altered.

Farmers: The foundation of the opium economy is made up of 2.4 million farmers and day-laborers²³ who share an estimated 20 percent of the profits.²⁴ While some farmers grow poppy to finance their “upward social mobility,”²⁵ the majority cultivate it out of a lack of legitimate substitutes because often opium “provides the only access to land, credit, water and employment”²⁶ for many farmers and laborers. As the largest segment of Afghan society (78 percent live in rural areas and the majority of that population is engaged in agriculture)²⁷ farmers are different from the other groups in another important way as well. In the same manner that the general populace is the center of gravity in counterinsurgency operations, the rural farmer is the center of gravity for counterdrug operations by virtue of his role in the opium economy and his numbers. Because the Afghan farmer remains the political prize in both counterinsurgency and counterdrug contexts, counterdrug operations must be designed to wean, not force, the Afghan farmer away from opium to legal alternatives to prevent driving him to the Taliban and other armed groups for protection against eradication.

Refiners: In the same way that fuel distillates from crude oil have higher market values than the oil itself, most opium is processed by refiners into its derivatives morphine and heroin because of the greater demand and market value for those drugs over raw opium. Until the 1990’s most Afghan opium was processed in Pakistan until authorities there made a

22 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), 2. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32686.pdf> (accessed 11 April 2009).

23 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, 1.

24 Jan Koehler and Christoph Zuercher, “Statebuilding, Conflict and Narcotics in Afghanistan,” 64.

25 Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghanistan: When Counternarcotics Undermines Counterterrorism,” 59.

26 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 7.

27 Jan Koehler and Christoph Zuercher, “Statebuilding, Conflict and Narcotics in Afghanistan,” 63.

concerted effort to drive opium labs out of their territory.²⁸ Since then, the majority of processing labs have increasingly migrated to Afghanistan where the same conditions conducive to poppy cultivation have created a hospitable environment for the refinement component as well.²⁹

Traffickers: Traffickers sit at the apex of the economy and are the smallest segment by numbers, but claim the largest portion of the generated profits. Their primary role in the drug industry is the smuggling of morphine and heroin across Afghanistan's rugged borders over major drug routes spanning Pakistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan³⁰ to the underground drug markets of Europe and Russia. In order to mitigate the significant risk to their illegal operations, the traffickers use their considerable drug profits to maintain close ties with 'warlords-turned-politicians' and corrupt government officials in order to protect their operations³¹ and as such are a major source of corruption inside the government. While U.S. officials have urged Afghanistan's various authorities to aggressively go after the traffickers and their government supporters, there have been few success stories because of extensive drug-funded political corruption.³²

Facilitators: Facilitators do just that—'facilitate' the opium trade in exchange for bribes and 'taxes' as payment for a variety of services ranging from protection against crop eradication and shipping security to lax border inspections and creative packaging.³³ The group comprises corrupt politicians and law enforcement officials, regional warlords with militias, and armed groups. The inclusion of government officials, specifically, in this

28 William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge," 8.

29 Ibid., 8-9.

30 Svante E. Cornell, "Stemming the Contagion: Regional Efforts to Curb Afghan Heroin's Impact," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 23-31 <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 17, 2009), 23.

31 William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge," 4.

32 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 38.

33 Ibid., 22, 23.

group is particularly damaging to counterdrug efforts because “often the officials and agencies that are supposed to be part of the solution to corruption are instead a critical part of the corruption syndrome.”³⁴ Corruption not only subverts counterdrug efforts but it also frustrates the administration of justice and damages the government’s legitimacy.

Bribes are paid at all stages of production and transportation, and all levels of the drug industry. For example, farmers often pay bribes to avoid the destruction of their poppy crops, local traffickers pay ‘tolls’ to pass police checkpoints, and minor officials often pay large sums to highly placed influence-peddlers to secure lucrative government postings in drug producing provinces.³⁵ This flood of drug money undermines existing counterdrug laws and weakens an already fragile judiciary system. Indeed, “[s]ome have claimed that the justice sector is the most corrupt in the country. Investigators, prosecutors and judges are too often part of the problem, not the solution.”³⁶ Whatever the circumstance or amount paid, the cumulative effect of this drug corruption is the weakening of fundamental state institutions, erosion of the peoples’ trust in their elected leaders, and the circumvention of counterdrug operations.

THE OPIUM AND INSURGENCY NEXUS

Over time the insurgency and opium economy have formed a symbiosis that is increasingly at the heart of Afghanistan’s most vexing problems. Levying taxes on all the parts of the drug economy is a commonly practiced way for insurgent groups to profit indirectly from the drug trade, but new information points to a more involved role in the opium trade by these groups. According to the State Department, the Hizb-i

34 Ernest Leonardo and Lawrence Robertson, *Assessment of Corruption in Afghanistan*, USAID Report. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADO248.pdf (accessed 24 April 2009), 4.

35 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 22-23.

36 Ernest Leonardo and Lawrence Robertson, *Assessment of Corruption in Afghanistan*, 7.

Islami/Gulbuddin (HIG), Taliban, and al-Qaeda are now assessed to be providing logistical support to facilitate money laundering and weapons smuggling, as well directing farmers to grow opium poppy.³⁷ This recently forged opium-insurgency nexus has given rise to a destructive, self-perpetuating opium-insurgency cycle that further erodes stability and undermines government institutions while strengthening anti-government elements.

The Opium-Insurgency Cycle: Armed groups, poor security, the government, and opium form the major components of the opium-insurgency cycle which is depicted in Figure 1. The cycle begins with insurgents and related groups diminishing the influence and presence of the legitimate government through violence and illegal activities. As the state grows weaker it loses the ability to impose its rule and provide security for its citizens. As stability gives way to instability, opium becomes more attractive as a crop choice and cultivation flourishes. Large drug profits fund and strengthen these armed groups through the collection of taxes, as well as provide the bribes to corrupt government officials, who in turn protect and facilitate the drug trade. Corruption and the government's growing impotence provide the breathing room for the opium trade to expand to new areas, generating more profits which strengthen the insurgents while destabilizing the government and perpetuating the cycle.³⁸

The aim of the U.S. '5-pillar' counterdrug strategy is to short-circuit this cycle by addressing the problems created by each stage or part.

37 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy*, 16.

38 Alyssa Greenspan, "Are We Fighting The Right War?" 3.

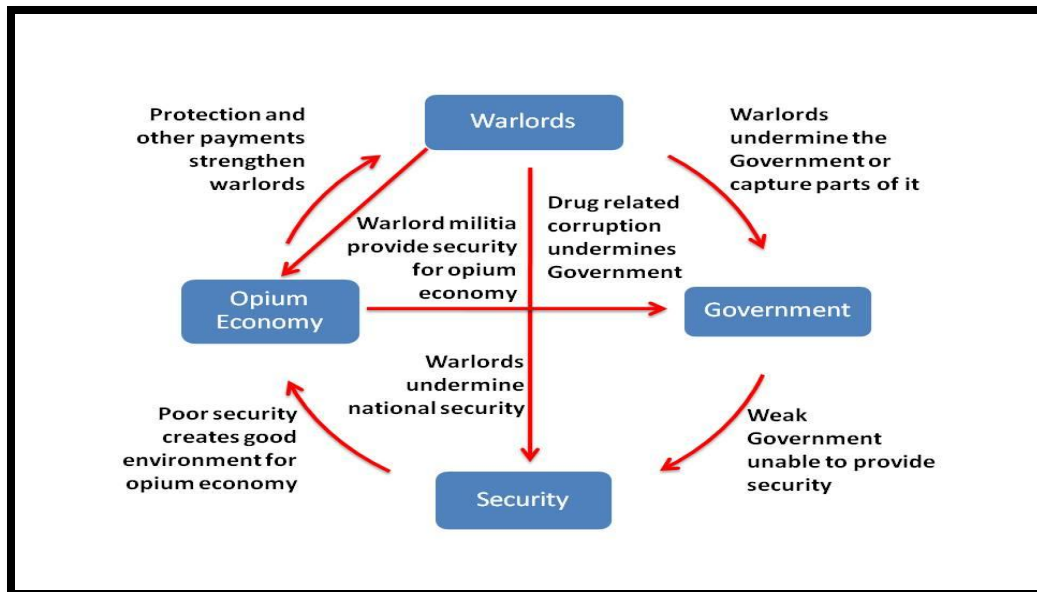


Figure 1. The opium-insurgency cycle. (Reprinted from William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge: Lessons and Policy Implications from a Development Perspective" (working paper, The World Bank, 2008), <http://www.wds.worldbank.org> (accessed 11 April 2009), 14.)

ANALYSIS OF U.S. COUNTERDRUG STRATEGY AND OPERATIONS

The current U.S. counterdrug strategy for Afghanistan consists of five pillars: 1) public information, 2) alternative development, 3) elimination and eradication, 4) interdiction, and 5) law enforcement and justice reform.³⁹ Although the strategy appears to take a whole-of-government approach, its implementation has not worked for several reasons. First, it is overwhelmingly unbalanced in favor of crop eradication, second, the remaining facets of the strategy are underfunded, and third, it relies on immature and inadequate Afghan forces to carry out counterdrug operations with minimal U.S. assistance. For the purpose of this paper, analysis will be limited to the alternative development,

39 U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, August 2007), 17-18. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/90671.pdf> (accessed 13 March 2009).

eradication, and interdiction pillars as the three components of the strategy that stand most in need of modification.

Alternative Development: Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest nations with some estimates putting as much as 70 percent of the population below the international poverty standard of \$2 USD a day.⁴⁰ The goal of alternative development is to address Afghanistan's serious economic problems by providing farmers and rural communities with viable alternatives to opium for their livelihoods.⁴¹ Experience in Afghanistan has demonstrated that "building functioning transportation and electricity networks, developing a market-driven agricultural sector, providing business support services, and strengthening property rights"⁴² contribute more to the continued suppression of opium farming and licit economic growth than eradication alone. And yet, alternative development, compared to eradication, is a considerably underfunded, supporting effort instead of the mainstay of our strategy. For alternative development to make a larger impact it must be made a priority in terms of effort and money. USAID as the lead agency overseeing the U.S. government's alternative development plan in Afghanistan is projected to spend over \$7.2 billion on alternative development from 2001 through 2009.⁴³ While that amount is not insignificant, it is still less than half of what the DOD will spend on reconstruction efforts during the same time.⁴⁴

Elimination and Eradication: The attractiveness of the elimination and eradication pillar is predicated on simple logic; eliminate the plants needed to make drugs and you can

40 U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan*, 39.

41 Ibid., 39.

42 USAID, *FY 2008 Annual Performance Report*, USAID, 2008, <http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/apr08/> (accessed 9 April 2009) 58.

43 Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 January 2009. http://www.sigar.mil/reports/quarterlyreports/Jan09/pdf/Report_-_January_2009.pdf (accessed 11 April 2009), 40.

44 Ibid., 41.

eliminate drugs. However, because 100 percent eradication cannot be feasibly achieved the objective is to reduce the amount of poppy grown thereby reducing the amount of drugs available and in turn causing drug prices to move higher.⁴⁵ It is assumed that as market prices for these drugs increase, demand will drop as fewer users can afford them at increased prices eventually leading to decline in the industry overall. Eradication has become the central pillar in U.S. counterdrug strategy, especially when viewed from a resource allocation perspective. Of the \$532 million that the Department of State and USAID spent on counternarcotics in 2005, more than 50 percent (\$258 million) was spent on eradication with the remainder split among the other four elements.⁴⁶

As ‘logical’ as the eradication approach seems, it has not worked in Afghanistan or in other counterdrug campaigns worldwide. For example, similar U.S. efforts in Colombia backfired when 128,000 acres⁴⁷ of coca were eradicated through aerial spraying resulting in a net increase in the area under cultivation in 2000.⁴⁸ Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, President Obama’s newly appointed Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, recently characterized eradication as possibly “the single most ineffective program in the history of U.S. foreign policy” while estimating current program expenditures near \$1 billion.⁴⁹ Instead of reducing the amount of drugs available, eradication does the opposite by

45 Coletta A. Youngers and Eileen Rosen, ed., “Drugs and Democracy in Latin America”, 4.

46 John A. Glaze, “Opium and Afghanistan: Reassessing U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy,” (Research Paper, Strategic Studies Institute: October 2007), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil> (accessed 17 March 2009), 9.

47 Note: This amount is more than 2.5 times greater than the largest amount (19,510 hectares) eradicated in a single year in Afghanistan for the last 4 years according to statistics provided by UNODC. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, 20.

48 Jeremy Bigwood and Phillip Coffin, “Coca Eradication” (Foreign Policy In Focus, March 2001), <http://www.fpif.org/pdf/vol6/07IFcoca.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2009), 1.

49 Richard Holbrooke, “Still Wrong in Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, 23 January 2008, A19. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/22/AR2008012202617.html> (accessed 22 April 2009).

producing unintended 2nd and 3rd order effects that strengthen incentives for future cultivation and promote dispersion to new areas.

First, eradication can produce positive results when it follows economic development, but without it eradication simply deprives farmers of their livelihoods. Unfortunately, too often alternative development programs have not created the necessary conditions to enable opium dependent communities to make the shift without significant economic hardship before eradication is implemented. In these cases, eradication does produce short-term reductions, but they are often offset by increased cultivation levels the following year.⁵⁰ Furthermore, pre-mature eradication drives the population into the insurgent's camp as they seek protection against government counterdrug forces.⁵¹

Second, eradication compounds a farmers' debt with the loss of his crop. Again, the dearth of viable opium alternatives, together with the *salaam* credit system produces a cause-and-effect cycle⁵² where the farmers are all but obliged to plant opium in a desperate attempt to repay growing levels of debt.⁵³ Indeed, there are instances of farmers repeatedly replanting poppy following several cycles of eradication because opium offers "the only way they can...have any hope of reducing their opium-related debts."⁵⁴ Hence, eradication only intensifies a farmers' economic motivation to replant opium at the next opportunity.

Third, eradication exclusively targets the most economically vulnerable part of the opium economy—the Afghan farmer—while perversely increasing profits for the intermediate and top segments further up the chain. In the wake of the Taliban-imposed opium cultivation ban in 2000, "the price of raw opium rose tenfold, from \$40-\$60 to \$400-

50 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 27.

51 Ibid., 29.

52 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan: When Counternarcotics Undermines Counterterrorism," 62.

53 Jan Koehler and Christoph Zuercher, "Statebuilding, Conflict and Narcotics in Afghanistan," 64.

54 William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge," 18.

\$600 per kilogram⁵⁵ which traffickers were able to capitalize on as they continued trading with pre-existing stocks. As a result, the refiners and traffickers became richer whereas the farmers grew poorer. Another side-effect of this marked inequality in enforcement leads to the erosion of the government's credibility, driving another wedge between the government and the rural population.⁵⁶

Last, eradication has not come close to making a significant dent in the total amount of poppy cultivated because of the limitations of manual eradication methods and Afghan political opposition to U.S. preferred chemical based spraying methods. The largest percentage of crops eradicated in the last 4 years topped out at 10 percent in 2007 followed by a mere 3 percent in 2008.⁵⁷ And yet, the white paper outlining President Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan indicates that eradication will remain a central feature of counterdrug efforts for the foreseeable future.⁵⁸ The same document, however, hinted at an increased emphasis on interdiction which has the potential to avoid the pitfalls of eradication while targeting those elements of the drug trade that are unlikely to transition to a legal economy.

Interdiction: U.S. joint doctrine defines interdiction from a counterdrug perspective as "actions to divert, disrupt, delay, intercept, board, detain or destroy, as appropriate, vessels, vehicles, aircraft, people and cargo."⁵⁹ Interdiction has several advantages over eradication. First, instead of going after farmers it can target those parts of the industry who

55 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 27.

56 William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge," 17.

57 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, 20.

58 Interagency Policy Group, *U.S. Policy Toward Pakistan and Afghanistan* (The White House, 2009), 4. http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan_pakistan_white_paper_final.pdf (accessed 28 March 2009).

59 Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Interdiction*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-03 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 3 May 2007), I-1.

are directly threatening government rule and stability.⁶⁰ This is critical because interdiction, unlike eradication, does not directly threaten the farmer's livelihood and therefore avoids many of the pitfalls associated with eradication. Second, it has the potential to temporarily drive down farm-gate prices depressing cultivation⁶¹ whereas eradication produces the opposite effect—increasing farm-gate prices and potentially spreading cultivation to new areas. And last, it “enhance[s] the government's credibility by going after criminal elements rather than farmers and wage laborers.”⁶² This is especially true when interdiction targets corrupt officials. In spite of these advantages, however, interdiction operations are not being carried out by the most capable and effective forces in theater.

Contemporary interdiction operations against the opium bazaars, labs, refiners, traffickers and corrupt officials are exclusively carried out by Afghan law enforcement agencies with DEA agents serving as advisors and mentors.⁶³ As a matter of policy, the U.S. military cannot participate in interdiction operations except to provide “transportation, planning assistance, intelligence, [and] targeting packages” in support of U.S. and Afghan drug enforcement agents.⁶⁴ Indeed, restrictions on U.S. participation go so far as to only permit U.S. forces to seize and destroy drugs and related resources if they are found while conducting other military operations.⁶⁵

60 William A. Byrd, “Responding to Afghanistan's Opium Economy Challenge,” 21.

61 Ibid., 21. Note: The term ‘farm gate’ refers to the prices farmers are paid for their crop at the location of the farm and do not include added costs of transportation from the farm-gate to market or other charges. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “Price statistics and Index Numbers of Agricultural Production and Prices,” http://www.fao.org/es/ess/prices/pc_04.asp (accessed 10 May 2009).

62 Ibid., 21.

63 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy*, 32.

64 Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Sees Antidrug Effort in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 25 March 2005, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B03E6D6173FF936A15750C0A9639C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all> (accessed 23 March 2009).

65 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy*, 32.

The problem with this approach is the adolescent Afghan police units are not sufficiently capable of conducting interdiction operations alone, or on the scale required to make a significant effect. A 2008 DOD assessment of Afghan National Police capabilities reported, “the current...force has not been sufficiently reformed or developed to a level at which it can adequately perform its security and policing mission” and pointed to problems with “institutional reform, corruption, insufficient trainers and advisors.”⁶⁶ Some Afghan counternarcotics police forces have reportedly made progress—raiding over 190 drug labs, targeting high value targets, and “destroying approximately 150 [tons] of opium annually”⁶⁷—but this falls far short of the drug network’s production capacity which was 7,700 tons in 2008.⁶⁸ The U.S. military for its part, however, is not anxious to depart from the status quo of providing support instead of conducting combined interdiction operations.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

Proponents of the current U.S. counterdrug strategy might make the following counterarguments: first, eradication has not been successful because of ‘artificial’ restraints on how it is implemented, and second, drug enforcement is police work and inappropriate for military forces to be involved in because it detracts from more important military missions.

Give Enhanced Eradication a Chance: Supporters of eradication often point to the physical limitations of manual eradication and restrictions on chemical based spraying as the reason it has not worked.⁶⁹ This line of reasoning hinges on the supposition that more

66 U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2008). 23

http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/Report_On_Progress_toward_Security_and_Stability_in_Afghanistan_1230.pdf, accessed 14 March 2009.

67 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy*, 27.

68 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, 1.

69 Thomas Schweich, “Is Afghanistan a Narco-State?” *New York Times Magazine*, July 2008, 46. <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed 23 February 2009).

efficient methods can eliminate more poppy and would therefore be more effective in producing the desired results. This argument, however, ignores the elasticity of the world opium market and the fundamentals of rural Afghan society.

The fluidity of the world's opium market is such that massive eradication in one area is most likely to result in the displacement of poppy cultivation elsewhere as occurred in Afghanistan when Pakistan shut down its illicit drug industry. History has shown that the market value of existing opium stocks usually increase following a drop in production as happened after the Taliban's opium ban where the significantly inflated value of opium stockpiles encouraged farmers to resume poppy cultivation in mass the following year.⁷⁰ The likely results of such wide scale eradication would most likely be the enrichment of the traffickers, armed groups, and corrupt government officials, while 'selectively' punishing those who grow it resulting in rural populations identifying with the insurgents.

Counterdrugs is Not a Military Mission: Military and political opposition to greater U.S. military participation remains strong. For example, the current National Security Advisor, General James Jones (ret) opined that counternarcotics was "not a military mission."⁷¹ Likewise, Representative Henry Hyde declared he "did not want our military forces already tasked with the vital counter-terrorism and stability operations to become Afghanistan's anti-narcotics police."⁷² The last comment reflects a fear that by going after the drug trade with military forces we will be diverting our efforts from accomplishing the primary task of defeating the insurgency. This

70 Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan*, 26-27.

71 Lolita C. Baldor, "NATO to Provide More Afghanistan Troops," quoted in Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), 37.

72 Henry Hyde, "Testimony," *House, Afghanistan Drugs and Terrorism and U.S. Security Policy: Hearing before the Committee on International Relations*, 108th Cong., 2nd sess., 2004, <http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/archives/108/91798.pdf> (accessed 11 April 2009), 2.

perspective is antiquated and ignores the interconnectedness of the insurgency and drug trade in Afghanistan at present.

U.S. joint doctrine, however, declares, “Counterdrug (CD) is a high priority national security and international cooperation mission” and allows “for the involvement of U.S. military personnel and their equipment and may include training or mission participation.”⁷³ Many tasks and missions that U.S. military has performed in both Iraq and Afghanistan have fallen outside the scope of ‘normal’, yet mission accomplishment (broadly defined) made it necessary for the military to quickly adapt and carry out new tasks. Counterdrug operations are, in essence, not drastically different from the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations that U.S. forces have been conducting for the better part of 8 years.

CONCLUSIONS

Eradication Doesn’t Work: Eradication is counterproductive and actually strengthens the opium trade while hampering U.S. and Afghan efforts to stamp it out. This approach has proven ineffective not only in Afghanistan, but in other parts of the world. Eradication can produce short-term supply reductions, but they are not usually sustainable and often result in a series of unintended consequences that work to increase the motivation for the average Afghan farmer to continue growing poppy. Continuing eradication will increasingly alienate the rural population from the government, strengthen insurgent groups, and increase the time and resources needed to bring this problem to a manageable level.

Alternative Development Works: Alternative development holds the key to permanently breaking opium’s hold on the rural population of Afghanistan because it is the only aspect of counterdrug strategy that can positively address the root causes of poverty and diminish opium’s attractiveness as a crop choice. The U.S. has made significant

73 Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Counterdrug Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-07.4 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 13 June 2007), ix.

improvements in providing the necessary programs to develop and sustain the financial, educational, and structural segments of Afghan society, but progress has been uneven throughout the country, and in areas under the insurgent's control, halting at best.

Afghanistan Needs Help With Interdiction: Interdiction operations have significant advantages over eradication, but they are not being conducted effectively for two reasons. First, Afghanistan's law enforcement and counterdrug forces remain unequal to the task of conducting interdiction on a larger scale, and the effects of drug corruption limit Afghan political support for targeting top level traffickers and facilitators. And last, U.S. political and military preferences have prevented U.S. troops from carrying out interdiction operations. The U.S. military's cultural aversion to direct participation in counterdrug operations is outdated and reminiscent of its previous distaste for humanitarian relief and peacekeeping missions that have gradually gained acceptance as core military missions. The Afghan counternarcotics community needs more than 'support' from U.S. forces—they need a full-time partner with which to conduct large scale interdiction operations, much as the fledgling Iraqi military and police forces required significant and active support from U.S. forces in combating the insurgency in that theater.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stop Eradication: After years of fighting insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen recently voiced what U.S. politicians and military commanders have collectively come to grasp—“that we can’t kill our way to victory” through traditional (kinetic) military operations.⁷⁴ Likewise, we can’t eradicate our way to victory against opium, either. By halting eradication its negative consequences for the rural population—deepening debt, loss of income, and ties to the insurgency—can be avoided or mitigated. If retained, it should only be used against those farmers who refuse to abandon poppy where legitimate economic options are available.

Increase Alternative Development: Alternative development funding should be increased relative to its importance in the overall counterdrug campaign and should replace eradication as the centerpiece of U.S. counterdrug strategy. Insecurity throughout much of the country remains a fundamental obstacle limiting the reach and feasibility of many alternative development programs. Almost all (98 percent) of Afghanistan’s opium production is confined to seven provinces⁷⁵ with Helmand as the epicenter accounting for 66 percent of total cultivation where Taliban forces control large territories. Consistent with the establishment of basic security and government presence within these hot-spot provinces, new alternative development programs should focus on these areas to begin the process of winning the populations over from opium to a more sustainable economy.

74 CNN, “Admiral: Troops alone will not yield victory in Afghanistan,” *CNNPolitics.com*, 10 September 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/10/mullen.afghanistan/index.html> (accessed 26 April 2009).

75 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, 3.

Combined U.S./Afghan Interdiction Operations: Until Afghan counternarcotics forces grow in size, proficiency, and reliability, the current restrictions on U.S. military forces conducting interdiction operations in Afghanistan should be removed. Far from being a diversion from ‘more worthy’ counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, interdiction operations have the potential to directly attack a major source of economic support to anti-government forces and drug organizations in a way that traditional military operations cannot. Attacking the drug industry’s infrastructure, shipping routes, key figures, corrupt officials, and most importantly, reducing the amount of drugs and money available, can help interrupt and diminish the effects of the opium-insurgency cycle.

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